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ABSTRACT

Two types of problems are found in the reading performance of children with poor work habits: a child may have mastered skills but performs inadequately in tasks due to poor work habits, and a child may never have mastered skills because of such habits. Work habit behavior is the student's tendency to apply himself or herself to learning tasks by displaying adequate self-direction in individual or group learning activities. Problems may occur in one of three stages of task performance: getting started, keeping going, and getting finished. Work habit problems increase as students advance in the grades. To build a structure for development of good work habits, teachers must do the following: help the student understand what abilities will be gained as a result of the task and how the ability to do what is expected will be demonstrated; make consequences of good or poor performance clear at the outset and stick to them; plan alternate methods of instruction if performance is inadequate; and help the child organize for the task. Specific techniques are available for teachers to use with students at each of the three problem stages. (DF)

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CHILDREN'S WORK HABITS AND READING PERFORMANCE

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Having finished the skill lesson with the Bluebirds, Mrs. Allen distributes the prepared practice worksheets to the flock. With the rest, Frankie diligently begins applying his freshly sharpened pencil to the dittoed sheets, drawing lines from printed blends to pictures which illustrate their sounds. Mrs. Allen moves on to a new group of waiting birds.

At day's end, Mrs. Allen checks Frankie's work. After the first few correct answers, she begins to note a pattern of almost random responses, with many errors. She is somewhat surprised, but concludes reluctantly that Frankie "didn't get it." He will need more work with blends.

Across the hall, Miss Baker's class is hard at work on developing comprehension skills. Sally's group is reading silently and completing a series of questions over what they have read.

In going over Sally's paper, Miss Baker finds Sally's answers almost all wrong, indicating practically no comprehension of the assigned selection. Miss Baker is distressed. She thought the assignment was appropriate, but obviously Sally's reading comprehension skills are suffering and need concentrated attention.

Such incidents are no doubt common in elementary classrooms. They typify the kinds of frustrations which teachers encounter

every day in attempting to promote truly effective reading skill in children. The frustrations are real, and so are, in many cases, the reading problems among children which create them. But is it possible that we are being too narrow in our perceptions of such instructional problems in reading? This writer believes that we are.

The basic premis of this paper is a simple one -- namely, that much of the poor reading performance among our children is not due to ineffective teaching, nor is it the result of an inability to learn on the part of children. Rather, it results from a persistent pattern of poor work habits in children which prevents them from taking full advantage of instruction and realizing their full learning potential.

Such an observation certainly is no surprising revelation to anyone who has observed or participated in parent-teacher conferences. Perhaps the most repeated phrase heard during such sessions is, "He is not working up to his ability!" What is surprising is that so little attention has been paid to understanding the nature and scope of this problem. Professional literature is virtually silent with regard to the phenomenon of poor work habits in school children.

At this point, a definition of this phenomenon is called for. The term "work habits" may be defined as:

> "a child's tendency to apply himself to a learning task by attending carefully to task explanation and assignment, maintaining attention to the task, assuming responsibility for task completion and accuracy, and generally displaying adequate self-direction in individual and group learning activities."

No doubt teachers in the United States possess the best constructed learning materials and the most sophisticated training available for promoting student learning. Yet the burden for learning still rests ultimately with the student. It is he who must assume personal responsibility for the performance which the school program is designed to elicit. It appears that this fact is too little appreciated by students -- and by their teachers as well.

Relationships Between Work Habits and Performance

Poor work habits may be related to inadequate performance in two ways. First, that which is perceived as inadequate performance is often only apparent and not real; the real culprit is work habits. Think back to Mrs. Allen's encounter with Frankie and his worksheet on blends. She concluded that he had not mastered this skill. But is such a conclusion justified?

From Frankie's point of view, this was "another paper" to be done (and, of course, it had to be completed before recess). Having become reasonably well skilled in playing the school game, Frankie has learned that "getting your work done" is one of the most cherished goals of teachers, and consequently is one of the most important school survival skills. He began the work with care and accuracy. But as the job wore on, he began to sacrifice accuracy to expediency. Though not necessarily intending to, he began to make quick and careless responses on some items. He finished the paper on time with all items completed? Isn't that what he was

supposed to do?

Of course it was. But Frankie has taken a course common to many children. He has perceived "getting it done" as more important than "doing it right." Needless to say, such an action on his part is at least partially the result of subtle, though definite cues he has received from his teachers that such a priority is important in school. And, in his home life, he may have never received consistent reinforcement of the notion that quality is more important than mere activity. Regardless of the genesis of such behavior, it has, to a significant extent, become a regular pattern in Frankie's approach to tasks. It is, in short, a habit.

Under such circumstances, Mrs. Allen's appraisal may in fact not be justified. Frankie's apparent lack of skill with blends may only be an artifact of this tendency in his approach to school work. More work on blends may not be what Frankie really needs.

Work habits may be related to performance in a second way. In this case, the inadequate performance <u>is</u> real, but is actually <u>caused</u> by poor work habits. Sally's situation is a case in point when analyzed in the following terms:

Miss Baker may have been absolutely right in judging Sally's comprehension to be faulty. She may have been wrong, however, in concluding either that Sally could not comprehend, or that her teaching of the needed comprehension skills was ineffective.

Suppose Sally had failed to pay attention to the directions and purposes set for the reading. Oblivious to the intended thinking required by the exercise, Sally approached the task with her own set of expectations. With difficulty, she attempted to complete the exercise in the light of those expectations. But in the process she wound up missing the intended point of the selection and actually built several inaccurate meaning relationships in her mind.

Sally indeed performed poorly on this task. But Miss Baker may not need to be quite so distressed over her inability to teach comprehension, or Sally's inability to perform it. Rather, Miss Baker might find greater profit in recognizing Sally's tendency to disregard or ignore the important elements of task setting and initiation, a tendency which rather consistently causes Sally to perform ineffectively. Experienced teachers confirm that Sally is not alone.

Specific Work Habit Problems in School

It is not always easy, or necessary, to clearly delineate the exact relationship between work habits and performance. Children's work habit patterns are complex and personal. However, it is important to recognize that their influence on school performance is pervasive and significant. A recent study[1] indicated that close to 80% of the inadequate performance of elementary school children was seen by their teachers as largely due to deficiencies in work habits, as defined above.

In order to more fully understand children's work habits as they relate to school performance, let us examine the

Specific types of work habit behavior which may contribute to the problem. The following list of specific work habit behaviors appears to offer a convenient and comprehensive summary of the constituent elements of the work habit phenomenon.

AT THE TASK INITIATION LEVEL:

1. Failure to pay attention to class instruction (lectures, demonstrations, discussions, etc.)

2. Failure to listen carefully to verbal directions and assignments.

3. Failure to read carefully written directions and assignments.

AT THE TASK PROGRESS LEVEL:

4. Failure to tolerate distractions while working (allowing other classroom events to interrupt one's train of thought or line of work)

5. Failure to maintain attention to, or interest in, the task long enough to insure its successful completion (tendency to wander from the task before it is successfully completed, even if distractions are not present)

6. Failure to cope independently with difficulties encountered while working (an attitude of dependence on the teacher for practically everything, rather than relying on one's own resources while working)

7. Failure to utilize time provided in class wisely to complete learning activities (tendency to waste or poorly manage time available)

AT THE TASK COMPLETION LEVEL:

8. Failure to place a premium on accuracy (tendency to make responses "just to get it done" without adequate concern for correctness)

9. Failure to hand in assigned work on time

10. Failure to hand in assigned work at all

It may be seen that work habit problems may occur at three levels of task performance. In other words, problems may occur in "getting started, keeping going, and getting finished." At each level, particular types of difficulties may be found, depending on the child and the task itself. It is suspected that readers who have had classroom experience can no doubt put names and faces with each behavior listed. Recent study has permitted some insights into the scope and seriousness of these problems as they relate to general school performance. No doubt these generalizations also apply to reading performance in particular.

First, it appears that problems are present in all the behavioral categories above. With few exceptions, 25 to 30 percent of elementary children are seen as exhibiting each of these various work habit difficulties. Though it is not known if the same children were identified under each specific behavior, we might suspect that in many cases this is so. This would suggest that poor work habits is a general trait which, if present in a child, tends to surface in many and various aspects of his approach to school work. On the other hand, some children no doubt suffer from rather specific and somewhat isolated work habit deficiencies. In any case, the presence of all these types of work habit problems among elementary children can be expected.

A second, and more disturbing finding is that the incidence of these problems appears to increase as children

move through the grades. In other words, work habit difficulties are seen as more prevalent in intermediate grades than in primary grades. This suggests that, whatever the source of such problems, the process of schooling in itself does nothing to alleviate them.

With regard to specific work habit problem categories, it appears that problems are most prevalent at the task initiation stage, with task progress problems being next in level of incidence, and task completion problems occurring least frequently. The three most widely reported behaviors, in order, were "failure to read directions and assignments," "failure to tolerate distractions," and "failure to use time wisely." Interestingly, the last behavior, "failure to hand in work," was seen as the least frequently occurring, but was, at the same time, judged to be the most serious problem in terms of its detrimental effect on school achievement.

Work Habits and the Teaching-Learning Process

With these preliminary understandings of the work habit phenomenon in mind, let us examine their implications for the teacher of reading. Interfacing work habits and reading does not lead to new postulates about reading methodology or materials. On the contrary, the existing instructional skills of teachers are assumed. What must be considered is how teachers may exercise managerial skills to (1) avoid loss of learning and reading growth which poor work habits often cause, and (2) aggressively promote the improvement of work habit deficiencies in order that every child may profit fully from the instruction he receives.

To put it bluntly, should we not elevate the development of work habits to a position of importance along side word recognition, comprehension, study skills, reading appreciation, etc., as a major objective in the teaching of reading? Such a notion is worth considering, for of what value is the imparting of proficiency in such reading skills if children are unwilling -- or unable to exercise them?

To look at the situation in broad terms, perhaps we need to reevaluate our basic perspective of the teaching-learning process. It appears to this observer that many teachers approach their work in terms of what they are going to do, not necessarily in terms of what the students are going to do. (Lesson plan notations such as, "cover page 62" illustrate this notion.) Indeed, it seems many children view school as something that is done to them, rather than something they do.

Under such circumstances, school becomes something of a "game" between the teacher -- armed with the latest educational innovations and sophisticated pedagogical gimmickery, and the child -- equipped only with an uneasy feeling that it is his duty to resist at all costs. Of course, this is an overstatement, but in reality such a description does characterize much of the prevailing attitude toward school.

The unfortunate result of such a perception of schooling is that it places the burden for achievement on the teacher and not on the child. And this burden is keenly felt by concerned teachers who spend many hours in distress over their

own inability to "make" children achieve the performance results they rightly desire.

In addition, such a situation poses a special threat to children who might be vulnerable to work habit difficulties. In the first place, resistance to teachers' attempts to make children achieve is most likely to surface in work habit related behavior, such as inattention, sloppy and careless work, lateness or absence of completed assignments, etc. Secondly, when such behaviors as these occur, they usually not only invoke the teacher's displeasure, but also result in a lack of desired achievement or learning, conditions which directly diminish the child's tendency to approach the next learning task with any greater diligence than was applied to the last. A vicious cycle of negative work habits and poor performance is created.

Building a Structure for Good Work Habits

What is needed, of course, is a concerted effort to break that cycle and to help the child see himself as having the power and responsibility to achieve; to place the burden -- and the reward -- for achievement in his hands. The role of the teacher then must become that of arranging the structure in which such achievement may occur and be clearly recognized.

Some of the important elements of building such a structure are as follows:

1. Help the child to understand what he will be able to do as a result of the learning experience or task assignment. (It is perhaps needless to say, but if the teacher finds this impossible to do, the need for the activity is, to say the least, questionable.)

2. Help the child to understand how his ability to do what is expected will be demonstrated. What is the criterion for success? How will he prove to you that "he can do it?"

3. Make the consequences of his performance clear <u>at the beginning</u>. What will happen if he <u>does</u> demonstrate performance according to the specified criterion? What will be required of him if he <u>doesn't</u>?

4. Plan alternate modes of attack to be used if performance is not adequate. The worst situation a child can be placed in is to know that is expected, fall short of that expectation, and have "no way out." It must be made clear from the beginning that he <u>will</u> succeed, but if he doesn't do so the first time, you are prepared to give him the help he needs to succeed the second, or third time.

5. Stick to the consequences outlined. Sometimes we seem to feel that we are being "mean" to children when they fail to meet specified objectives and we in turn carry out specified consequences. On the contrary, we are only being <u>fair</u> to them in doing so. To accept inadequate performance leads to lack of learning and devalues the importance of the performance itself. This hardly promotes a sense of personal responsibility in children as students, or as citizens.

6. Equally important, stick to the consequences of <u>successful</u> task performance. Children will not persist for long in striving for excellence when such behavior is consistently ignored and not reinforced.

7. Help the child organize for the task. Help him to see under what circumstances he will need to work (time, place, materials, etc.) Help him to anticipate difficulties. Often children can be greatly aided by entering into contracts specifying the details of their responsibilities. Or, they might enjoy using other tangible devices, such as flow charts, to plot their progress in the task.

Admittedly, such notions are "good common sense" and are hardly new. Nonetheless, systematic and diligent attention to them has not been a hallmark of all classroom teachers. Carefully and consistently applied, they effectively help the teacher to make the child the responsible agent in his own learning. He knows what he must do. He knows how he can demonstrate his skill to his teacher. He knows what positive "pay off" there is for doing so. And he knows that his teacher will find other ways for him to succeed if the challenge at first proves too difficult for him.

Under such circumstances, he can begin to see himself as an effective individual who has a say in his own fate, yet always aware of the teacher's support and competence to help him over the rough places. There is challenge and yet there is security -- fertile ground in which the seeds of responsibility and self-confidence may sprout and grow.

In the absence of developing such characteristics in children, teachers are left with the unhappy prospect of "doing it all" -- of personally shouldering the burden for

every child's achievement. Not only is such an approach essentially impossible -- we cannot learn for them -- but it is also a source of frustration and discontent, and it negates an essential goal of school -- the building of responsible citizens.

Lest it appear that we have strayed too far from the relationship of work habits to reading performance per se, let us pause to recall the essence of our argument, namely that the effective teaching of any reading skill is pointless in the absence of a child's ability and willingness to make that skill a part of his own personal reading behavior. For those children who suffer from poor work habit tendencies, the direct and intentional development of positive work habits may often be equally as important as the reading instruction we so diligently disperse.

Suggestions - Task Initiation

As we have seen, getting a good start on learning tasks is a point of considerable potential work habit difficulty for many children. Whether we are involved in teaching a skill lesson, initiating practice activities for skills taught, guiding oral or silent reading, or promoting enriching follow up activities for materials read, "well begun is half done." How might we insure greater exercise of positive work habits at the task initiation stage?

First, care must be taken to keep the tasks small enough to be manageable, and therefore, achievable in the child's eyes. Completion of two full workbook pages of skill practice,

or a series of fifteen comprehension questions over an entire selection, may be too much (or perceived as too much) for some children. Chances for success are doomed from the beginning.

Therefore, decide in advance what you consider to be the minimum level of correct response you will accept as a demonstration of adequate performance. On this basis, assignments may be differentiated. Correct response to the first five (easiest) items may be required of all. Completion of ten (including some more difficult) items correctly may be made a requirement, or an option, for some abler students who can, or wish to, commit themselves to it; doing all fifteen items may be reserved as a special challenge for those who are highly skilled and highly motivated. Naturally, differing levels of positive consequence are also spelled out to coincide with the differing levels of performance.

Such an arrangement meets every child at his own work habit level. The child who balks at tasks for fear of failure, or has a tendency to be lazy, knows that there is an acceptable minimum which even he can achieve and thereby gain justifiable and worthwhile praise. The more diligent worker is given an opportunity to "try his wings," deriving just reward if successful, yet avoiding certain condemnation if he is not.

Another concept concerning task initiation is hinted at in the arrangement just described -- that of challenge. Learning tasks must be presented to children as challenges. The notion that a learning task is something the teacher is

going to make the child do must be replaced by an attitude which says, in essence, "Here is a challenge for you. See if you can prove to me that you can conquer it." Needless to say, such a challenge is to be presented in terms which acknowledge that the task will be difficult. A task which is presented to the child as "easy" for him offers no real pay off if it is achieved, and is doubly crippling to his ego if it is not. This underlying attitude of challenge in assigned learning tasks is crucial in helping the child to see himself as the effective agent in his own achievement, and it is often amazing how even the most unmotivated student will respond when learning tasks are presented in this way.

Another important facet of promoting good work habits at the task initiation stage is allowing student participation in the formulation of goals and objectives for the task. This is not to say that children decide what they want to do in reading class. We should, however, include them in discussions of anticipated procedures and outcomes, and encourage them to state such expectations in their own terms. How else can they be expected to take personal responsibility for them? To put it bluntly, expectations which exist only in the mind of the teacher logically must be left to the teacher to fulfill -- exactly the opposite of the circumstances we desire with regard to work habits. (How many children try to excuse their poor performance because they "didn't know wh[illegible]

Finally, we might promote better work habits at the task

initiation stage by being more careful about how instructions and directions are given. Many children fail to assume personal responsibility for their performance right from the beginning because they know the teacher will come to their rescue if they don't. In practical terms, establish the pattern of giving directions once, and once only.

The initial response to this action might well be total confusion, or even minor rebellion. But children adapt amazingly well. They quickly learn that the responsibility for paying attention and getting started correctly is theirs, not the teacher's. Occasionally it might be advisable to record directions, so that those who find themselves initially lost may replay instructions to refresh their understanding of the procedures and expectations. Even when this is done, the responsibility is clearly still the student's. Such an approach not only fosters good work habits, but eliminates the persistent wasting of time by repeating directions which robs us of so much instructional efficiency.

Suggestions - Task Progress

These suggestions for promoting good work habits at the task initiation level have in common the goal of helping children to assume personal responsibility for, and pride in, their own performance and, incidentally, promoting greater teacher efficiency. Yet even some children who get started will find their performance breaking down as the task proceeds. They lose concentration or interest, or yield to

distractions. Perservance in tasks adequately initiated is a precious commodity which we must also encourage children to acquire.

Obviously, teacher anticipation can do much to alleviate such problems. By thinking through the task demands from the child's point of view, the teacher may often anticipate problems before they occur, and prepare children for them when the task is being initiated. Likewise, the teacher may often promote smoother progress by planning physical arrangements to facilitate the elimination of distractions.

Beyond such measures, teachers may institute systematic procedures for promoting personal responsibility in task progress. First, it is probably wise to determine the limits of your assistance as a teacher and so inform your students at the beginning. For example, you may want to make yourself available for help on a scheduled basis. This forces children to cope somewhat independently with difficulties they encounter and consult you only with persistent and clearly identified problems.

Every teacher has some children who seem to demand attention at every single step of their work. They seem constitutionally unable to proceed without constant dependence on the teacher. In some cases, this is because they are legitimately confused and unable to proceed. If so, the problem lies in task initiation; the child is attempting to do something for which he is ill-equipped, or was poorly prepared. Yet for many children such behavior appears to be clearly a <u>habit</u> they have gotten into --

a pattern of dependence and reliance on the teacher which they have somehow adopted as the path of least resistance to achieve the required acceptable performance. Such a pattern is contrary to the whole notion of personal responsibility and pride in achievement we have been discussing. Breaking that pattern requires discipline on the part of the teacher, and results in self-discipline on the part of children.

One other aspect of promoting good work habits during task performance must be mentioned, and it has to do with the role of other children as helpers. What we are suggesting, of course, is that we encourage cooperation in the completing of learning tasks. This may be done informally, or may involve the designation of individual children (including on occasion the less able students) as helpers or consultants, to give assistance while the teacher is freed for other instructional duties.

It is no doubt true that children may often learn things easier from their peers than from teachers. Yet, we often discourage the use of this most effective and available learning resource. We do so because we fear that they will "cheat." Such fears must be rationally examined. In the first place, appropriate task initiation, as discussed above, reduces the need for cheating. Children who are secure in their work and who recognize the potential pay off for doing it "on their own" derive little pleasure from cheating and will gradually abandon such a strategy as their confidence in their own abilities grows.

Secondly, we must realize that in attempting to prevent children from cheating, we also are effectively preventing them from being honest. In taking careful steps to prevent them from cooperating in learning tasks, we are, in essence, telling them we expect them to cheat, and this is hardly conducive to promoting the kind of personal responsibility and pride in achievement we desire.

Finally, discouraging cooperation in learning promotes an approach to life which is contrary to that which is required for good citizenship. The essence of social progress is the ability of people to work together. Why should we not encourage children to exercise such abilities in school, and in the process, promote greater individual achievement, not to mention wiser use of teachers' precious time?

Suggestions - Task Completion

Careful attention to the development of good work habits in task initiation and task progress are central ingredients in promoting the third area of work habits, task completion. In fact, insuring that a child gets off to a good start, and actively promoting continued progress, are the surest means of maximizing his tendency to complete the task successfully. Yet, some children may still falter at the finish line, and thus fall short of achieving desired performance lvels. How can we help the child who has never developed the habit of seeing a task through to a successful conclusion?

One key to helping children develop habits of successfully completing tasks has already been alluded to -- putting a premium on accuracy. In other words, we must help children to recognize that doing something well is more important than merely getting it done. In practical terms, this may mean modifying assignment procedures.

For example, how many words must a child correctly syllabicate in order to prove that he has grasped the principle being used? The answer may vary from teacher to teacher, but it is almost certainly fewer than children are routinely required to do. When faced with row upon row of such words, even the most skilled child often becomes careless, or quits. Why not rather modify the assignment something like this: "Do the first ten words. If you get them all correct, you are finished. If not, I will ask you to do some additional practice."

Such an approach puts the emphasis where it belongs. It encourages the child to make <u>right</u> responses and helps him control his tendency to be careless or become discouraged. Extra practice is reserved for those who genuinely need it, and that need is made clearly evident to them. There is a pay off for good performance, and habits of prizing accuracy are established.

Secondly, we can utilize self-checking activities. Most performance tasks in reading may be made self-checking. Aside from the fact that student self-checking may free the teacher for other important teaching duties, it strongly encourages

positive task completion habits, for the child can receive immediate and personal feedback. Most of all, it helps him to see himself as the responsible agent in the monitoring of his own performance.

Related to this notion is the concept of making progress demonstrable. Most children will strive to achieve good performance when some tangible evidence (a chart, for example) shows that progress in ways he can see. Often children are unable to perceive how they are doing in school. They have no idea of what their grade card will look like -- no concept of whether they are doing well or poorly. They seem to feel that such a determination is somehow mystically made by the teacher and has little, if any, relationship to what they themselves think they are doing. Such children must be given some means of gaining control over, and taking personal responsibility for, their own progress.

Summary

These thoughts concerning work habit behaviors during task initiation, task progress, and task completion have stressed the theme of helping children to assume personal responsibility for their performance and develop pride in their own achievement. They are offered not as revelations, but as reminders. Most teachers recognize clearly the effect of poor work habits on children's school performance generally, but may fail to give direct attention to these problems in the day-to-day teaching of reading skills.

In the opinion of this writer, such failure may negate much of the otherwise excellent reading instruction given to children. For the child who suffers from poor work habits, that condition is like a crippling disease, robbing him of the ability to perform to the limits of his potential, and depriving him of the sense of well-being and self-respect he deserves to enjoy. As teachers, we must treat this disease for what it is, and thereby help children lay sure claim to the reading power which our teaching can provide them.

Reference:

[1]Schroeder, Tom S. "The Nature of Work Habit Deficiencies and Their Contribution of Poor Academic Performance in Elementary School Children" (mimeographed) Ball State University, 1977